

LOCAL

El Paso City Council continues investigation into members' 'excessive' fuel card use



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The El Paso City Council voted 6-1 to direct outside counsel Frank Garza to launch an investigation into council members' fuel card usage and directed Chief Internal Auditor Edmundo Calderon to continue his review of fuel card usage over previous years.

"There's been a lot of accusations toward council, toward FOAC (the Financial Oversight and Audit Committee), toward (the auditor's office), toward me," Mayor Oscar Leeser said during Thursday's special meeting. "We want to hire someone that's independent of the city to continue the investigation."

East-Central city Rep. Cassandra Hernandez, who the auditor's report shows spent nearly \$6,700 on fuel last year – the highest among the council and mayor's office – was the only member of council to vote against the continued investigation. East Side city Rep. Isabel Salcido was not in attendance for the meeting.

The vote follows findings from a spending report that showed Hernandez and former East-Valley city Rep. Claudia Rodriguez accounted for 63% of the fuel purchased by the mayor and council last year. The report also stated that the purchases appeared "excessive" and likely represent more than one car being fueled on the city's dime.

More: El Paso City Council to hold special meeting over members' 'excessive' fuel card use

Council members held their tongues during Thursday's meeting, offering no opinions on the allegations against Hernandez and Rodriguez, but their votes suggest they agree with many who spoke during the meeting's public comments section calling for accountability and transparency.

It is unclear when Calderon or Garza will present their findings and recommendations, though the auditor recommended in his report that the city eliminate fuel cards for the mayor and council and instead provide a vehicle allowance, a recommendation he mentioned multiple times during Thursday's meeting.

Calderon provides overview of findings, more questionable spending

While the brunt of the ire against Hernandez and Rodriguez is aimed at the quantity of gas they consumed in 2022, Calderon described a number of other questionable purchases the two made last year.

When it comes to travel expenses, Calderon said Rodriguez did not submit two receipts – one for about \$219 at Dick's Sporting Goods and another for \$27 at a Sheraton Hotel in Fort Worth.

"We could not even find the travel request on that transaction," Calderon said.

Among the fuel purchases, Calderon noted that Hernandez purchased gas on multiple separate occasions while she was seated in council chambers, indicating that she allowed someone else to use her city gas card.

Additionally, Calderon noted that Hernandez's gas card was used multiple times while she was at a conference in Canada.

Rodriguez, meanwhile, purchased gas in Pecos in 2020 and in Carlsbad and Fort Stockton in 2021, along with two purchases in Van Horn last year.

"We were unable to determine what was the reason for the purchase," Calderon said of the Van Horn expenses. "We couldn't find the travel request; we couldn't find anything. ..."

Hernandez repaid the city \$6,700 on May 5, while Rodriguez has maintained that she would only repay the \$5,294 she racked up last year if it could be proven that she did something wrong.

Despite allegations, many rise to defend Hernandez

More than a dozen residents signed up to speak during the public comments portion of Thursday's meeting, with speakers nearly evenly split between those condemning the actions of Hernandez and Rodriguez and those standing to defend the two.

Representatives from both the Cielo Vista and Rosedale communities submitted statements defending Hernandez's actions and praising her work within their communities.

Mike Adjemian, on behalf of the Cielo Vista community, said that he understands there are questions related to potential excessive spending, but he said his community also believes "there have been attempts to create an issue where there is none."

Marion Ceniceros, on behalf of the Rosedale community, urged the council to take no further action on the issue and allow Hernandez to "continue her important work."

Others disagreed.

"The measure of the character of an elected leader is how he or she behaves when no one is watching," said local historian Max Grossman, who has been an outspoken critic of both council members' behavior since news of the spending first broke.

Minerva Torres, meanwhile, urged the council to undertake a "full and impartial investigation to determine if any abuse of power occurred."

"The community elects our representatives and, therefore, we deserve to know if any wrongdoing occurred," she said. "I hope City Council will take this matter seriously and conduct a thorough investigation. ... "

Phillip Laign, who recently filed a complaint against Hernandez with the Texas Ethics Commission alleging that she improperly used city resources to advocate against Proposition J, said he was "disturbed" by the report's allegations and believed they warranted further investigation.

"The excessive fuel use ... cannot be justified," he said.

Hernandez declined to comment on Thursday's outcome.

